



ART IN CINEMA

Illustrated talk by Marie Seton

IT is not the fault of the film medium that it is all too frequently used in the commercial cinema to the crudest ends. Cinema, like literature, encompasses the novelette and thriller as well as the minority of films which can justly be ranked along with masterpieces in the other fields of artistic expression. Film is the youngest of the art forms; it is but fifty-nine years old. It is certainly the form of expression which most exactly represents the 20th century which has given it birth.

Today I am not going to discuss the films which characterise what is called the commercial cinema. I want instead to discuss some aspects of the type of cinema to which a film like the Bengali picture, *Pather Panchali* belongs; that is, the art film which attracts a discerning public.

I think I should begin by saying that some thirty years ago, that is, following the First World War, the cinema in Europe—especially in Germany, France, the Scandinavian countries and the Soviet Union—began to attract the attention of artistic minded people. They saw in this new medium a means of creating a new art form in which they felt that the ideas and creative theories of the 20th century could be given dynamic expression.

These people, who in another generation would have expressed themselves in literature, painting or the theatre, had a feeling that the classical arts were no longer the dynamic means of communicating the ideas of this century.

They were attracted by the dynamic possibilities of the film. It was these people who broke the film away from the theatrical traditions from which it had sprung.

They concerned themselves with every kind of experiment, striving continually to use the eye of the motion picture camera to portray life in a new way. Sometimes the art film was very fantastic; sometimes it was highly realistic. Since there were no traditions to be adhered to every possible experiment had its place. To show the range of the art film let me mention two extremes:

In the late 1920's Joris Ivens in Holland made a film called *Rain* which was confined to portraying all the possible visual effects produced by rain. Almost at the same time in France the Danish director, Carl Dreyer, made a film about the trial and death of 'Joan of Arc' and the whole of this great historical drama was presented in terms of close-ups showing the emotions and reactions of Joan and the Inquisitors who tried her. Both these films, so very different in character, revealed the extraordinary effects that the camera eye could record when used with exceptional imagination.

But let me go back a little to 1919. In that year the first so called art film was produced in Germany. This was the film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which now stands as one of the major milestones in the history of cinema. The director of this film—Robert Weine—took a story about people in a mad-house and clothed

it in the settings, costuming and a style of acting which indicated the influence of expressionism which was then a current trend in painting and, to some extent, a trend in the German theatre. This highly experimental film caught the imagination of people who had hitherto had little or no interest in a cinema dominated by the ordinary entertainment film.

The Cabinet of Dr. Galigari opened the door of the cinema—and especially the German cinema—to an exploration of the macabre and to dramas based upon psychoanalysis.

Shortly after this France became the centre for the production of experimental films which bore the label *avant-garde*. One of the first of such films to be made in France was produced by the great French painter, the late Fernand Leger. Leger was fascinated by the early films of Charles Chaplin so he decided to make a film which, starting with an image akin to Chaplin developed into a film composed of the movement of near abstract forms. This film was *Ballet Mechanique* and it set off a chain reaction which brought all sorts of artists into the cinema in France. These people constituted the cornerstone of the French school of film. They are late Jean Vigo whose most famous film is *Zero de Conduite*—a near-surrealist portrayal of the emotional life of school boys.

Then there is Rene Clair, who started in the cinema as a disciple of the Dadist movement: Jean Renoir, the son of the painter whom you all know as the director of *The River*. And perhaps the most remarkable is the poet-painter-theatre director and film producer Jean Cocteau. All of these men were schooled in the art world of Paris and they brought their cultural heritage to the screen.

As a result of the French *avant-garde* film movement, Paris became the centre for the production of experimental films. Now I would like to show you an extract from one of these films—*The Idea* made by the Czech artist Berthold Bartosch with music composed by Honneger.

The Idea weds pictorial art and cinema together, for it is Bartosch's animation of a book of woodcuts by the German artist Frans Masreel. It was made with figures cut out of black paper: while the figure of the woman—symbolising the Idea, or ideal which is indestructible—is cut out of white transparent paper.

This film, which appeared at the moment of Hitler's rise to power, was made as a cry

against war. It not only represents the experimental trend in film making but also the effort to use the artistic film to sway public opinion. It is an allegorical film.

"The Idea"

The *Idea* is the type of film which is presented in Europe in what is called the specialised or art cinemas. It is also a film society and cine-club film.

Now I want to show you a film based directly upon a famous work of art of the early Italian Renaissance painter Giotto; his frescoes on the life of Christ. This type of art film is one of the styles of film which has developed in the last ten years. The one you are going to see now *The Drama of Christ* was the first to be produced in Italy. The director, Luchiano Emmer, created this style and subsequently there have been a number of similar films produced in France.

The development of films of this kind has had the effect of making schools of art and organisations connected with art cinema conscious. The Arts Council of Great Britain, for example, is now using films to spread knowledge of both painting and sculpture. In America, institutions such as the Art Institute of Chicago present films of artistic merit to their students and the public for general purposes of film appreciation.

Now let us see *The Drama of Christ*.

The third film I am going to show you today is of an entirely different kind. It is not a film specifically related to art but a film which was originally conceived on an epic scale and was in part inspired by the Mexican school of mural painting. This film is one for which I was responsible in the form you are going to see it. It is *Time in the Sun* based on the unfinished Mexican film of Sergei Eisenstein, and a film which your Government has purchased for preservation.

I am sure that you all know of the Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein. It is now rather commonly felt by critics and film historians that Eisenstein is the major artist that the cinema has so far produced.

It was Eisenstein's early films *Potemkin*, *October* and *General Line* which did so much to lift the cinema from the realm of entertainment to the realm of art. These films have influenced film-technique all over the world.

Eisenstein's aim was to create a synthesis of all the arts in his films and thus create a new

art—the art of cinematography. Later this week I am going to give a seminar on the Life and Work of Eisenstein. Here I will only deal with his unfinished Mexican film.

Throughout his life Eisenstein was influenced by painting. In 1928 the Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera, visited Moscow and met Eisenstein who became captivated by what Rivera told him of Mexico.

Late in 1929 Eisenstein received leave from the Soviet film industry to go abroad for a year. This leave led to Eisenstein being employed to make a film by Paramount in Hollywood. The plan broke down. Eisenstein, with the help of Charlie Chaplin, made arrangements to produce an independent film in Mexico which the American novelist Upton Sinclair finished.

Eisenstein and his assistants went to Mexico and what emerged was the idea of a film portraying the living history of Mexico. This film was to have a prologue, four separate stories each symbolising a different period in Mexico's history, and an epilogue. Shortly before the last of the four stories was shot a disagreement arose between Eisenstein and Upton Sinclair. The film was halted, Eisenstein returned to Moscow and the film footage was never sent to him to edit. What resulted was the greatest scandal in cinema history.

To all intents and purposes it appeared as if Eisenstein's Mexican film was lost. Then nearly ten years later I, by accident, found Eisenstein's immense footage lying unclassified in a film vault in Hollywood. I was in Hollywood to write a series of articles for the *Manchester Guardian*. Eisenstein was a friend of mine and just on the eve of the last was I came very close to getting Eisenstein's Mexican film back to him so he could edit it. But the war came too fast. I could find nobody to preserve Eisenstein's film so, after much thought, I decided to produce a film from the material. This is *Time In The Sun* which is a *shadow*, or let us say the skeleton, of Eisenstein's monumental concept for his film *Que Viva Mexico*.

Apart from portraying the history of Mexico, which I might say is the classical history of a country which emerged from colonialism, Eisenstein's artistic aim in his film was to find a unity of form and content.

You may be wondering why this film based on an unfinished film should be shown today when my subject is Art in Cinema. Well it is shown for two reasons: First, you will see

that each single shot in the film is composed as a great painting might be composed. Second, this film, so deeply influenced by Mexican art, has been used for study by art schools in America, England, Italy and elsewhere. During the Mexican Art Exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London in 1953 it was presented at the request of the Mexican authorities as the film which gave the background to Mexican art. The Arts Council sent it all over England in connection with the exhibition.

Now let us see *Time In The Sun*.

Today we have merely grazed the surface of the subject ART IN CINEMA. But I hope you will feel that the film is a form of art when it is used by artists. Since I have been in India I have been constantly aware that this is one of the richest countries in the world so far as artistic expression is concerned. There are thousands of films to be made from the material of Indian life but so far this wealth has remained virtually unobserved, or let us say unexpressed, in most Indian films. Cinema is the most expensive art medium. That is why cinema is so generally concerned with entertainment films which bring quick box office returns. But art films have been created around the world, and they have been created by those people possessed by a passion to express themselves in film and to mould the cinema medium into an art form.

I have known personally all the people whose films I have shown you today. They, like great writers and painters, have all been prepared to sacrifice everything material for love of the film form. They have all been driven by passion to create their films. And throughout the history of art in every age and every country dedication and passion are the motivating forces behind the creation of great works of art. I rather think that Bartosch, who made *The Idea*, Emmer who made *The Drama of Christ* and Eisenstein, who was utterly absorbed in his Mexican film, are men akin in spirit to the inspired and devoted sculptors who fashioned Elephanta, Ajanta, Ellora and Sanchi. They were certainly men of the same inspired spirit as Tagore. Commercial cinema has no use for such men; they can only work if given a chance by discerning people. They are the idealists of the cinema. People akin to them do exist today in India as shown by a film like *Pather Panchali*. I hope more and more truly artistic films will be created from the great heritage of Indian art.

Thank you.